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Uncovering and discovering creative practices that foster student and staff engagement

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This special issue is a potpourri of vibrant contributions that evidence the importance of creativity for personal and professional development across disciplines and contexts. Creativity has clearly been recognised and embraced by practitioners aiming to diversify provision and develop creative confidence and capabilities that make learning and teaching stimulating and exciting for students and staff.

The contributions to this special issue have highlighted instances of creativity across academic programmes at undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral level, across disciplinary and professional domains and across the dimensions of process, product and purpose. We, the editors of this special issue, have discovered a lot about the creative process due to the reflective nature of the contributions. A number were from the areas of teacher education and academic development, evidencing the important role of modelling creative and novel, or unusual, learning and teaching approaches where teachers are engaged first as students before introducing change to their own practice and revealing the power that lies within when academic development is transformative (Stefani, 2017). These contributions are truly encouraging and provide a useful indication of where we are currently in academic development and teacher education and what can be achieved through it. We seem to create a valuable space for experimentation in learning and teaching, which is encouraging.

We have seen that our contributors are individuals who feel passionate about the power of creativity for learning and student engagement and their work evidences a commitment and a creative energy to make learning exciting for their students. They immerse themselves and their students in imaginative learning activities, embrace uncertainty, risk taking and playfulness and recognise the difference these can make to learning and development. They clearly drive creative learning and teaching practice and, for many, it is experienced in a safe space— whether in their own module or as extracurricular activities. It is contextualised and multifaceted. The experiences highlight the joy and playfulness of teaching creatively and the suspense and excitement it can generate. These experiences present a refreshing alternative to academic competitiveness. Novel connections are triggered, often through play, that leads to surprising discoveries (Nussbaum, 2013). Play is not something we should reject as childish and inappropriate in the HE classroom, instead we should consider play critically and creatively in the context of our practice and the novel opportunities it creates (James & Nerantzi, 2019). Experimentation is the essence of play.

While some of the practitioners in their contributions acknowledge challenges when using more creative and unusual approaches in their practice, collectively the feeling is of using this special issue as a celebration, as an opportunity to share their work - as exemplars of success in the HE classroom. The cross-fertilisation of ideas and practices enabled by this wider sharing is so important for nurturing and spreading creative practices, especially, as it is recognised that creative ideas usually grow out of the ideas of others and through the combination of these in novel ways (Resnick, 2017). We are looking forward to finding out what ideas and practices will emerge as a consequence of bringing this collection together.

Whilst the majority of creative interventions and practices curated here are directly linked to a specific module, course or programme, one of the contributions describes a creativity festival resulting from a strategic institution-wide initiative to foster, support, promote and spread creative practices. James and Brookfield (2014) state that creativity is an essential for learning on a daily basis. It would be valuable to explore what could drive university leaders to take more risks in learning and teaching and show their support to creative practitioners and innovators as well as how they could support creative cultures and communities to flourish within and beyond their institutions. Things have started changing, we need to acknowledge this. Institutions have begun to acknowledge the need for creativity and creative learning and teaching approaches. The stories, practices and reflections in this special issue give us a flavour of what is currently happening across a number of institutions, disciplines and professional areas. They help us to be curious about the future and to ask questions. How can we move beyond tolerating creativity, to actually embracing it and see it as expansive for all of us? How can we establish flexible, creative habits of minds and practice? How can we hold ambiguous ideas simultaneously? How can we be creative and critical at the same time? Does the term 'creativity' in itself, make us feel uncomfortable? Do we know what creativity looks like in our discipline/professional area? And what are the implications for our students if we don't? How can we spread the bug for creative learning and teaching beyond those who would do it anyway or regardless- and usually under the radar? Is there time for creative learning and teaching or is it about time to make time for it? And what about space? Will time create that space? A crammed curriculum cannot be a creative curriculum. Have we lost a sense of authenticity and context? How can we bring flexibility into the curriculum and maximise what diverse individuals bring?

The contributions have stimulated our pedagogic imagination and we hope that it helps to move creative practice beyond the pioneers, the risk-takers, the rebels and the playful dreamers to become a characteristic that is integral to HE provision – to a place where creativity is celebrated and where creative practitioners and their students feel empowered and supported. Creativity is for life and harnessing its powers and spreading it more widely is something we need to invest in, as individuals, as institutions and as a society. A creative mind is an open mind it is comfortable and even thrives in uncertain conditions, makes novel connections, experiments, explores, discovers, identifies problems and turns them into opportunities.

The methods of reflective inquiry and case study which predominate in this issue, capture the perspective and experiences of academics and other professionals who teach or support learning in higher education. They often present a microcosm of creative activities, a snapshot of a classroom or an intervention. HE focuses a lot on measuring impact - even in creative endeavours – and this focus is not easily avoided. We tend toward measuring what can easily be measured and creativity is not easily measured. In measures of satisfaction, creative approaches are often perceived negatively as it has the potential to generate resistance and rejection, by students and staff due to its novelty, and because it is unfamiliar and different from the tradition and norm. What we do need is empirical evidence.

The work captured in this special issue presents evidence of the important role community and collaboration plays in becoming and being creative in learning and teaching. While there are many individual practitioners who push the boundaries and take risks, there is evidence that impact can be greater when we experiment with others. When we know that the creative endeavour is shared.

Several contributions show that these collaborations are practitioner-driven. Creative practitioners seem to find ways to find each other. Their search often extends beyond their institutional boundaries and open and digital practices bring new and exciting opportunities. Through joined-up experimentations, creative practitioners feel more connected and supported with like- and other-minded individuals and they can also offer support to others. It is that reciprocity and the ability to do stuff, that boosts their imagination and their commitment to try something new - this has the potential to make a difference to student learning. Making a difference to others, students and staff, is a strong driver for creative change and we see this in the contributions. This seems to define the purpose of, and for, creative engagement. It may be that their collaborations with others, boosts their inner strength, that in turn lets them overcome or even ignore the obstacles or see them as opportunities. Obstacles may be there in the form of disciplinary traditions or conservatism. Where the learning process is based on partnership, dialogue, co-experimentation and co-creation, students and staff can learn with and from each other. Contributions describe this reality for many, making us wonder if there is also a need for such practices to be encouraged and nurtured at an institutional level.

Creativity as a process, as an aid to develop criticality, is recognised as a strength for resolving issues, blocks and dilemmas. However, a case is also made for creativity as a product and output and for seeing creativity more holistically as an enabler for knowledge construction and growth, both individually and collectively. It is fascinating to observe the visual dimension of creativity articulated in a number of the contributions, including still and moving images. When it comes to creativity, or creative approaches, technology seems to be integrated into learning and teaching and not seen as something special or as an innovation itself. Digital curation and portfolios, for example, are presented as a creative way to foster student engagement and learning that has the potential to extend and enrich learning, including collaborative learning.

Jackson (2014) talks about innovation as enacted, applied creativity, while Reisman (2018, 19) notes that “innovative pedagogy has as a goal to prepare individuals to be creative, face changes, manage and analyze information, and work with knowledge.” We have seen contributions that illuminate the power of the individual practitioner and their collaboration with others in networks and communities as an important driver for creative learning and teaching. Practitioners are driven to be creative and innovate, to make a difference to their students’ experience and their learning. This is the key driver for them. Supporting the more adventurous practitioners and their related networks and communities at institutional level and fostering a culture where creativity is recognised as a vital ingredient of learning and teaching, will help spread innovation beyond small pockets of activity. As practitioners feel appreciated, valued and supported by their institutions and their colleagues, so they will become even more experimental and adventurous in their teaching.

What is clear from the collective contribution of the work showcased here is that we are on a journey, one that offers a window into different practitioner perspectives on, and illuminates the benefits of, creativity for student engagement. It is a celebration of individual creative practices that make a difference to student engagement. We are at a crossroads. We need to critically engage with, and problematise, creative practices and approaches that stretch beyond the individual if we are to build and develop an evidence-base to establish HE cultures that foster creativity and innovation in learning and teaching. The question is, are institutions ready, willing and able to move in this direction?

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